



BUZZY JACKSON

SHAKING THE
FAMILY TREE

Blue Bloods, Black Sheep,
and Other Obsessions
of an Accidental Genealogist

207



SOCIAL SCIENCE

"WHO ARE YOU AND WHERE



As a historian, Buzzy Jackson thought she knew the answers to these simple questions—that is, until she took a look at her scrawny family tree. With a name like Jackson (the twentieth most common American surname), she knew she must have more relatives and more family history out there, somewhere. Her first visit to the Boulder Genealogy Society brought her more questions than answers . . . but it also gave her a tantalizing peek into the fascinating (and enormous) community of family-tree huggers and after-hours Alex Haleys.

In *Shaking the Family Tree*, Jackson dives headfirst into her family gene pool: flying cross-country to locate an ancient family graveyard, embarking on a weeklong genealogy Caribbean cruise, and even submitting her DNA for testing to try to find *her* Jacksons. And in the process of researching her own family lore (*Who was Bullwhip Jackson?*) she meets legions of other genealogy buffs who are as interesting as they are driven—from the boy who saved his allowance so he could order his great-grandfather's death certificate to the woman who spends her free time documenting the cemeteries of Colorado ghost towns.

Through Jackson's research she connects with distant relatives, traces her roots back more than 250 years and in the process comes to discover—genetically, historically, and emotionally—the true meaning of "family" for herself.

"Interesting and very entertaining—I read it wit

—TRACY KIDDER, AUTHOR OF *STRENGTH IN WHA*

LCPL
929.107207 JAC
Shaking the family tree : blue
bloods, black sheep, and other obses
Jackson, Buzzy.
Bib#640598

31696132886308

"It's as if Tony Horwitz or Sarah Vowell invaded the h
genealogy and exposed our past-adoring, source-citing, ancestor-worshipping
underworld." —MEGAN SMOLENYAK SMOLENYAK, author of

Who Do You Think You Are?: The Essential Guide to Tracing Your Family History



© ANDREA SCHER

BUZZY JACKSON is the author of the award-winning *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them* and is a research associate at The Center of the American West at the University of Colorado, Boulder. The story behind her family nickname can be found inside this book. Visit her at www.buzzyjackson.com.



EBOOK EDITION ALSO AVAILABLE

MEET THE AUTHORS, WATCH VIDEOS AND MORE AT
SimonandSchuster.com
THE SOURCE FOR READING GROUPS

COVER DESIGN BY SALAMANDER HILL DESIGN

0750

ISBN 978-1-4331-1209-1 \$14.99 U.S./\$19.99 Can.



PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

CONTENTS



1 Ask Yourself Why You're Doing This; or, Genealogy for Beginners 1

An introduction to the world of genealogy and how I got interested in it. Here I provide an outline of how to do genealogical research and, coincidentally, a map of the book's structure.

2 They See Dead People But I Stick to the Living; or, Join Your Local Genealogical Society 18

Seeking help from experienced genealogists, I join my local genealogical society. I begin my family research by interviewing my parents and by asking myself how much I really know about my family tree. Answer: not much.

3 Interview Your Relatives and Go to Your High School Reunion; or, Rust Never Sleeps 39

Having exhausted my parents' fund of knowledge (and my own), I travel to Michigan to conduct interviews with extended family, seek access (mostly denied) to family Bibles, and visit my grandparents' graves for the first time. A few weeks later I attend my twentieth high school reunion, which offers another type of family connection.

CSI: Lido Deck: The Genealogy Cruise, Part I 61

4

I dive into genealogy's deep end, attending a conference held on a Caribbean cruise ship. Literally adrift in a sea of knowledge, I try to glean as many research clues as possible, all the while marveling at the expertise of my guides and the intensity of my fellow attendees. Did I mention I'm on a cruise ship? Which is weird.

Beaches and Burke's Peerage; or, the Genealogy Cruise, Part II 96

5

As the lecture-intensive phase of the cruise comes to a close, I tour the islands with the dean of Irish genealogy and enjoy conversations with an assortment of other experts, from the author of a dictionary of surnames to the woman who wrote genealogy's equivalent of The Chicago Manual of Style—all by herself.

Information Wants to Be Free; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love DNA Testing 115

6

I'd already tested my DNA; I now try to understand my results. Here I offer an overview of what DNA testing can and cannot offer genealogists. After an initial anticlimax, I'm stunned when a total stranger contacts me and, thanks to the double helix manages to flesh out several hundred years of my family tree in less than five minutes. It could happen to you . . . really!

Get Back to Where You Once Belonged; or, Hitting the Road to Alabama with Cousin Mooner 146

7

With nearly four hundred years' worth of Jackson history now in hand, I set out for Alabama with my cousin Mooner riding shotgun as we cruise the southern byways on the lookout for relatives—some alive, some dead. From Nashville's honky-tonks to the abandoned cemeteries of Sumter County, Alabama, we rely on the kindness of strangers (some of whom share our name) to better understand our southern heritage. It's not always pretty, though sometimes it's beautiful.

**The Mountain and the Cloud; or, A Pilgrimage to Salt Lake
City's Family History Library 180**

8

All genealogical roads eventually lead to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, a mind-blowing archive run by the Church of Latter-Day Saints (aka, the Mormons). I speak with the chief genealogist at the FHL, the man responsible for its hundreds of billions of records, as well as with the collections director who oversees the archives in Ukraine where one half of my family's archives probably still sit. Mostly I marvel at the several thousand genealogical pilgrims (most non-Mormon) who visit the FHL every day.

Ask Yourself Why You're Doing This . . . and Keep

Asking 213

9

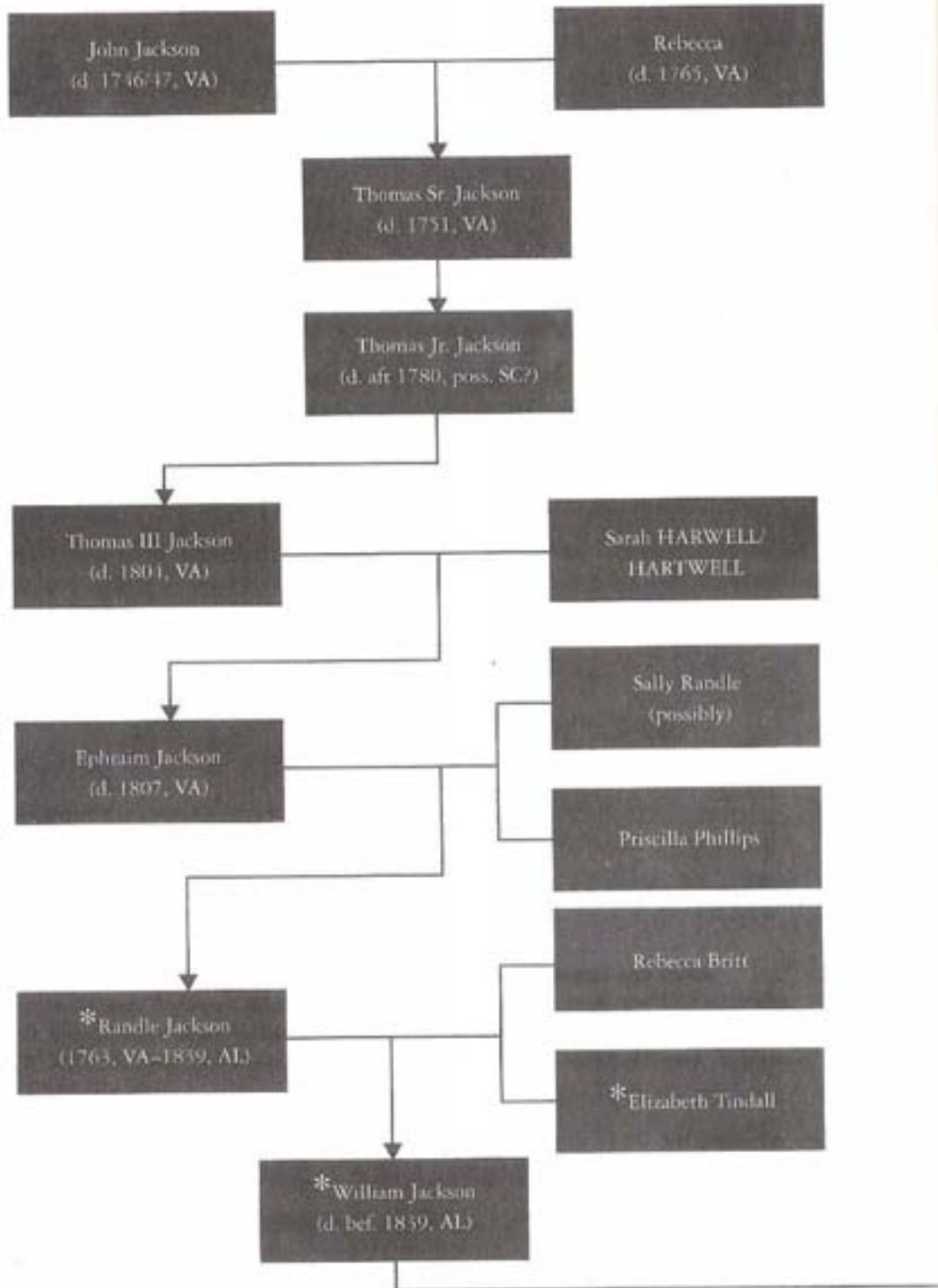
A reflection on the unending nature of genealogical research, which is both a good and a bad thing. I assess my own progress, and wonder if any other Jackson descendant will ever visit that overgrown cemetery in Sumter County, Alabama, where a dozen of my antebellum ancestors lie.

Acknowledgments 231

Notes 235

About the Author 242

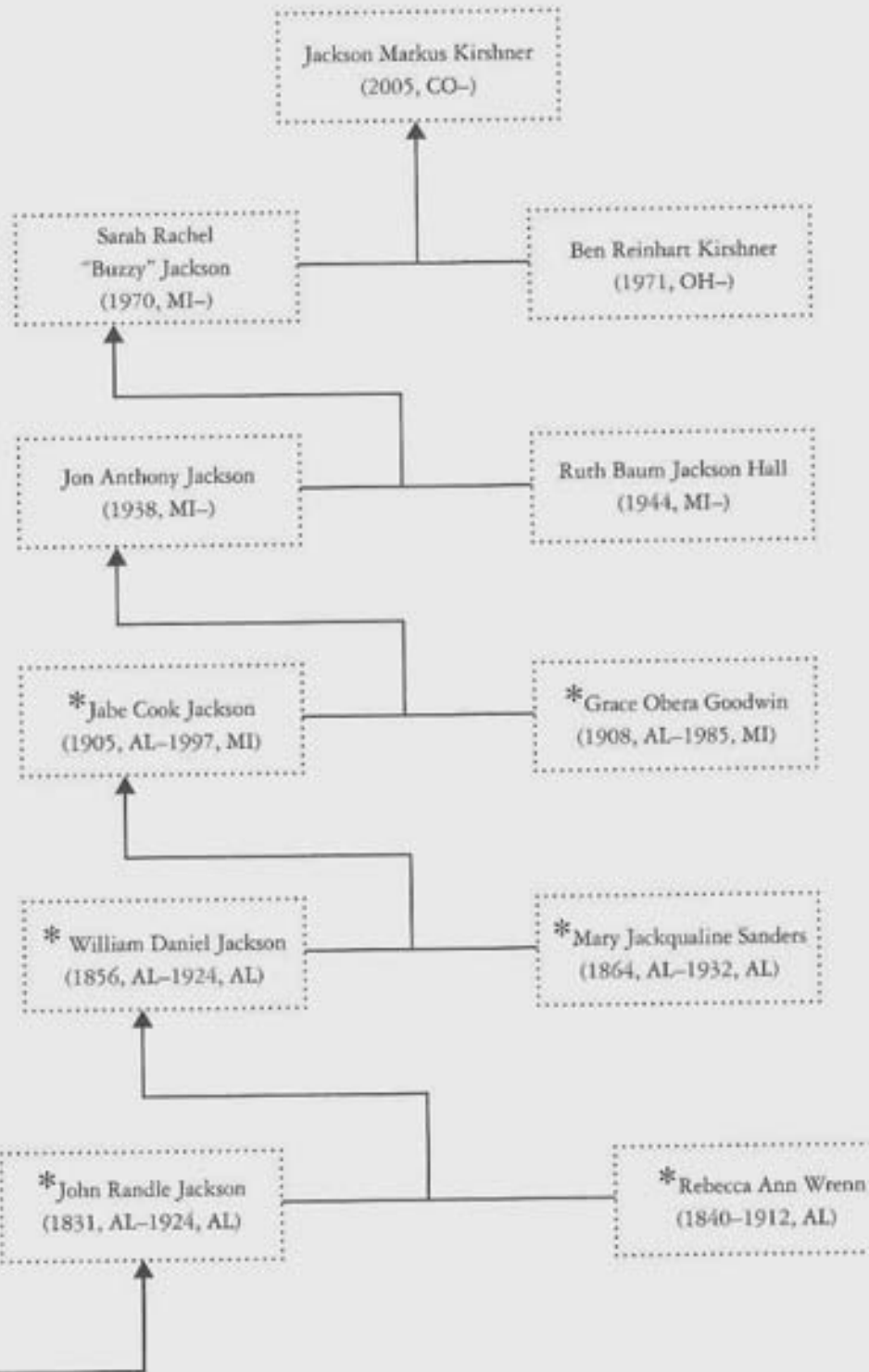
Thirteen Generations of American Jacksons



KEY

■ Discovered via DNA test (See chapter 6)

* Visited gravesite (See chapter 7)



Ask Yourself Why You're Doing This; or, Genealogy for Beginners

Ask yourself why you're doing this."

Pat Roberts, a woman with a stylish haircut, some serious jewelry, and the no-nonsense voice of a high school guidance counselor, stared out at the group of strangers who'd shown up for the introduction-to-genealogy seminar that morning at the Boulder Public Library. I suddenly realized what was coming: just like that guidance counselor, this enigmatic gatekeeper was about to tell us whether our expectations were realistic or just plain ridiculous.

"Ask yourself why you're doing this," she repeated, this time with a rhetorical spin. "If I put that question to each of you, I'd get twenty different answers. So ask yourself: What do you hope to find?"

Other people's history

In my case, it was a circus tent and a dentist. And a cattle farm in Mississippi and, of course, Windswept. I'd come to the Boulder

BUZZY JACKSON

Public Library looking for the truth, if it existed, behind both the tall tales told by my family as well as the silences. I didn't suspect scandal, but I wouldn't be surprised to find some. This seemed realistic; at least, it didn't seem totally absurd. I was also looking for one other thing: a strategy.

I was looking for Jacksons—my Jacksons, among an ocean of people who shared my name but not my DNA. Jackson is the twentieth most popular surname in the United States; in the year 2000, 666,125 Americans were named Jackson. We are legion—but whom did I mean by “we”?¹

My father, Jon Anthony Jackson, is one of eight children spread out over seven states. They like each other, yet they rarely see each other. As a family, we neither send nor receive regular Christmas letters. Frankly, most of us probably feel virtuous if we can remember all the cousins' names. Now that my grandfather Jabe and grandmother Grace Jackson are dead, there is no central “home” to return to—not that many of their children visited much, anyway. Whether that is normal, I don't know, but it sure didn't make for a strong sense of heritage. I'd spent seven years getting a Ph.D. in history . . . *other* people's history. It had never occurred to me to look into my own.

Recently, this lack of family narrative began to bother me. The furthest back I could trace my ancestors was three generations: my great-grandparents. That barely got me into the nineteenth century, and I started to feel a little, well, irresponsible about it. I'd spent a lot of time in graduate school tracing the history of African-Americans, people who lamented their history of enslavement not only for its obvious privations, but also because of the way slavery erased their family connections, as parents, children, siblings were separated and sold, names changed, and records lost. Something similar had happened on my mother's side of the family, Russian Jews who fled persecution to come to the United States in the brief window of time when such a migration was possible.

SHAKING THE FAMILY TREE

So what of the Jacksons? I knew they'd arrived in this country before my maternal ancestors, but how much earlier? I had no idea, and no one was discussing it at the Jackson family reunion, because there was no reunion. Ever. Oscar Wilde wrote that "to lose one parent . . . may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." So what if you've misplaced your entire family tree?²

Life offers some reliable milestones guaranteed to thrust family in our faces. Weddings, for example. My husband, Ben, has two uncles, one aunt, and four cousins. Me, I have six (surviving) aunts and uncles just on the Jackson side alone, with who knows how many cousins (and, sadly, I didn't). For a couple trying to plan a small wedding, you'd think the Bride's Side of the aisle would be the problem here, but no. No, because it barely occurred to me to invite any of my Jackson relatives: I hardly knew most of them. The wedding planner in me was relieved, but the Jackson in me felt, for the first time, a little sad about the etiolated state of the Jackson family horticulture.

Another major milestone was the birth of my son—or rather, the forty weeks leading up to it. It was a magical time filled with excitement . . . and paranoia, nausea, and more questions about my family health history than I'd ever imagined possible. Causes of death, incidents of stroke, commitments to sanitariums? I needed the information fast. The eventual birth of my healthy son did, of course, provoke all the expected but nevertheless poignant emotions related to the Circle of Life and the perpetuation of the family line, but honestly? It was the endless medical interrogations that really got me thinking about where this baby came from.

Weddings and births are happy reminders of the ways we are all connected to the billions of human beings who walked the planet before we got here (over 100 billion at last count). Funerals, of course, prompt similar thoughts, and also force us to think about our own mortality. None of my grandparents were at my wedding; they had all passed away by then—but I had only attended one of

BUZZY JACKSON

their funerals. I was never very close with any of them, but with the birth of my son, I found myself missing my grandparents and trying to remember how they looked, how they sounded, and the stories they'd told.

Jabe Cook Jackson was the most riveting storyteller among them. Born in Alabama, he was one of those southerners who turned every utterance into a memorable *bon mot*. Some family stories are told more often than others; among Jabe's eight children, each one might have a different version of a canonical yarn, and each version would be equally funny and vivid. Sheer numbers contributed to a Jackson family narrative pieced together according to the rules of the old game of Telephone; stories are repeated and commented upon, then subtly changed and passed not only from father to son, but also from sister to brother.

Growing up—and even now that I am, *abem*, grown up—every once in a while a relative would drop a Family Bomb. A Family Bomb was one of those Jackson family stories so bizarre and unexpected that it threw everything into a new light. They usually appear in a conversation apropos of nothing in particular. One involved a mysterious black “brother” of my grandfather—a Family Bomb first dropped when I was about twenty-two. My dad just happened to mention it during an otherwise unremarkable conversation: *Oh, and another thing: your white, southern grandfather grew up in Jim Crow Alabama with a black orphan boy around his own age whom he considered a brother. Never knew what happened to him.* Right. Or: *Actually, when we first moved to Kingsley, the whole family lived in a circus tent.* Sure. And: *You've never met those cousins? They're the ones who own a cattle ranch, and when they got tired of asking the bank for money, they started their own.* Their own what? *Their own bank.* Oh.

So there was the black brother question, the circus tent issue, and the First Bank of Jackson mystery. There were others, too. Why, at Grandpa Jackson's funeral, did my righteous, devout Christian aunt Mary insist to the undertaker that my Baptist-minister

SHAKING THE FAMILY TREE

grandfather—her father—was Jewish? Why did my grandparents name their home in Kingsley, Michigan, Windswept? It sounded like a southern plantation—was it an homage to a lost antebellum homestead? I didn't know. With all these questions in mind, I began to seek answers.

I hoped my background in American history would help. I had a lot of experience with old records and dusty documents, but I had never applied it to my own family. I'd gone to the introduction-to-genealogy course that morning in an attempt to bring all my Jackson relatives, dead and alive, together—if only on paper. I wanted to gather them up and make sense of them if I could.

The name gatherers

Within one second of walking into the meeting room, I'd made my first major discovery: *I am not alone*. It's not that I found my long-lost Jackson cousin sitting there. It was that I found so many other people, strangers to me, each on their own identical quest.

I am not alone is a sentiment that resonates on many levels when beginning a journey of family history. In this case the numbers signified something surprising: forty-seven people had taken time off work or arranged a babysitter in order to come to the Boulder Public Library on a Tuesday morning, all to get help with their family trees. I was definitely not alone.

It didn't surprise Pat Roberts, of course. As the secretary of the Boulder Genealogical Society and its director of education, Pat had witnessed what the rise of the Internet had wrought: a whole new generation of genealogy enthusiasts eager to Google their family trees. Once the province of orphans and aspiring Daughters of the American Revolution, the world of genealogical hobbyists is now exploding in popularity, thanks in part to the immense new repositories of data on the World Wide Web. That's why Pat was here: to

BUZZY JACKSON

guide all of us in this journey—a journey that more and more people were making every day.

How many people are actually doing genealogy? According to the official Directory of Genealogical and Historical Societies, Libraries, and Publications in the United States and Canada, there are twenty-two thousand genealogical and historical societies; twelve thousand genealogical and historical periodicals; and ten thousand public and private genealogical and historical libraries, archives, and collections. Looking through the directory, I found an average of thirty to fifty genealogical societies per state, divided by county, city, and sometimes by special interests such as ethnic affiliation. That's a lot of genealogical societies—heck, that's a lot of societies, period. So much for bowling alone.

Not everyone interested in genealogy joins a society, though. Most genealogy hobbyists do their stuff on the Web, and I found even more numbers there. As with most genealogical quests, you can't go wrong by starting with the Church of Latter-Day Saints (aka the Mormons). The LDS Church began compiling family history data for religious reasons a century ago and these days their archives contain information on over one billion people. The church's Family History Library has always been open to the public, but until recently that required traveling to Salt Lake City. In 1999—hallelujah!—the church launched www.FamilySearch.org, the Web version of the Family History Library archive. Since then, over 150 million people have visited the FamilySearch Web site, with one million registered users and more than fifty thousand people accessing the site every day. And that's just *one* archive. In the past few years dozens of new free and fee-based Web sites have popped up to offer different types of searches, whether for census information, birth and death certificates, or—my personal favorite—tours of "virtual cemeteries," where one can peer at all those faded headstones without scuffing a slipper. It's pretty clear: one reason more people are interested in genealogy is that it's gotten so much easier to do.

SHAKING THE FAMILY TREE

The people gathered in the Boulder library that morning probably started their searches online. If their explorations were anything like mine, they'd experienced an initial thrill (Hey! Someone named Desmond Jackson is also looking for *his* ancestors!) followed by a slow dissipation of excitement (Okay, there are, um, a *lot* of people named Jackson looking for their ancestors . . . and somehow we're all looking for different people). I now knew what a helium birthday balloon felt like as it shriveled and drifted to the floor a few days after the party. It felt like it was time to get help.

Sometimes I think nothing in this world would ever get done without the no-nonsense grit and guidance of women over forty. Pat Roberts knew what we needed and she was willing to help. She smelled our desperation as we filed into the conference room, lunging for her information packets. We needed guidelines. We needed parameters. We needed to focus, people. Pat would provide a Plan of Action.

We'd already asked ourselves why we were doing this. But Pat was not going to make us state our motivations aloud. "Some people want to find a celebrity ancestor," she said. "In my case, my husband challenged me to find out if his family tradition was true—were they descended from a signer of the Declaration of Independence?" Pat had a friend named Jane who was already experienced in genealogical searches, and she also encouraged Pat to dig in. "I was intrigued," Pat said. "I came down here to the Boulder library and ordered microfilm from the National Archives. I turned my children loose in the children's section, and they played while I looked at the microfilm."

I groaned. Seven years of graduate school had left me a battle-scarred veteran of the University of California's army of ancient microfilm readers, massed in a herd in the half-height stacks of a dusty, windowless no-man's-land somewhere beyond the periodical room. I thought my labor in the archival mine shafts had ended when I submitted my dissertation: Did my interest in genealogy mean I'd have to descend again?

BUZZY JACKSON

"This was 1973," Pat continued. "The copies came out on thermo paper—you can't even read it anymore. Microfilm . . ." She shook her head. I did, too. "You cranked it . . . it's ugly . . ." Yes it is. I could almost see my as-yet-unpopulated family tree begin to wither, leafless.

"But what we did back then was a totally different type of genealogy," Pat said.

I perked up and I'm pretty sure several others in the room, perhaps with their own hellish microfilm memories, did, too. Pat explained that while it was still necessary to use microfilm from time to time, the Internet had revolutionized the practice of genealogical research. Not only were many archival resources online, but "now, with the Internet, we're communicating with people we never would have found before . . . ever, ever, ever." It was now possible to find distant relatives online—relatives who might already have done a lot of your family research for you. Now we were getting somewhere.

"We're getting our hands on stuff we never would get before," Pat said. "Back then, genealogists were just name gatherers. We collected as many names, births, marriages, and deaths as we could. If it looked reasonable, we jumped on it. But we were not doing good genealogy." What she meant—and this was something I would hear a lot as I learned more about the changes in genealogy—was that very few people made much of an effort to actually verify the information they found in family Bibles and in the stories of Aunt Ida. If it was a name or date: it was good to go. Over the past few decades, even before the Internet arrived on the scene, genealogists have gotten more professional in their research. Proper citation is a big deal these days, as is good record keeping. There is more information to be had, which means there is a lot more information to organize. "I can do in two weeks what it would take me two years to do back then," Pat said, referring to her early days of research in the 1970s. My friend Matthew calls these TGF! moments: Thank God For the Internet. I hoped to have a lot of them.